

Is the PR job tenure-track too?

C Kevin Geedey¹ and Jeffrey L Dudycha²

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Lauren is in her second year as a tenure-track professor at a medium-size university. She survived the chaos of her first year, got a grant, and attracted a couple of graduate students. Her duties include both research and teaching (graduate and undergraduate) in evolutionary ecology.

Her grad student, Jim, showed her a letter to the editor from the local paper – a long creationist diatribe, rife with factual and logical errors. Jim and the other students passed it around, chuckling at the obvious fallacies. Lauren found the letter more unsettling than funny, but assumed someone from the local scientific community would reply. Days passed with no response, so she decided to do it herself. She typed a letter to the editor, being especially careful with its tone. She didn't wish to sound dismissive or high-handed, but she wanted to make it crystal clear that the creationist's views were scientifically unfounded.

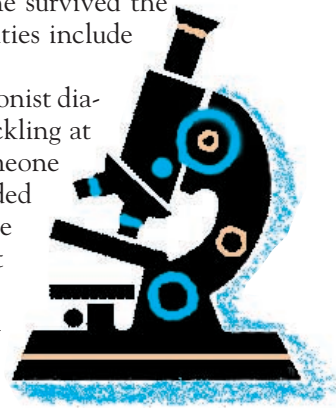
When the paper ran Lauren's letter, Jim and other students congratulated her for taking a stand, and other faculty members echoed the sentiments. Lauren felt good – she had done her part to educate the public. The glow was ephemeral, however. The creationist submitted a vitriolic rebuttal in which, Lauren felt sadly, he had either misunderstood or disregarded her arguments. In the following days, letters from two other local creationists appeared. Jim urged Lauren to write another letter: "If scientists don't take a stand here, no one will!" Reluctantly, Lauren wrote a second letter to the editor, trying to make the differences between science and anti-science even clearer than before. Given the response to her first letter, she put a considerable amount of time and worry into the second one.

Letters from creationists began to appear almost daily in the paper. None of Lauren's peers commented on her second letter. She began to feel overwhelmed and didn't have the time or energy to respond to the flood of letters. She suggested that Jim take up the pen, but he begged off, arguing that he was too busy. Some of the later creationist letters called for action at the next local school board meeting, when science education guidelines were to be reviewed. Other stories in the local paper reported that the school board was deeply divided over the controversy, and that public comment and attendance at the next meeting could be critical.

Lauren read these letters and stories with mounting frustration and anxiety. Speaking in front of the school board would require careful preparation. Furthermore, when Lauren checked the date on her calendar, she saw that the timing was a problem. She had managed to get several undergraduates from her evolution course interested in research, and they were due to spend most of that week with her at a remote field site, collecting data for their project. The plant population they planned to study would only bloom for a short time, so delaying their field trip might seriously damage the project. Lauren decided to discuss the situation with two tenured members of the department whom she trusted.

Milton, the department chair, had direct and unhesitating advice: "Lauren, dig through your files and reread your contract. Your duties here are research, teaching, college service, and community service, in vastly descending order of importance. The more time you spend debating creationists, the less time you will have for research. Forget about influencing the school board. Let the voters sort that out at the next election. Focus on the things that you're being paid by this university to do: research and teach."

Stanley had been in the department for 15 years, and Lauren knew him as a careful and dedicated scientist. They met once a week for coffee. His advice was different: "As professional members of an academic discipline, we have a duty to interpret knowledge from our field to the public. The public pays taxes that support this university, and they have a right to expect more from us than journal articles that no one outside the field would ever think of reading. You teach our classes in evolution, you are up to speed on the issues involved in the debate, and you're a great public speaker, articulate and persuasive. No one else in the department would have as strong an impact on the board as you would. You have a duty to science see this thing through."



¹Department of Biology, Augustana College, Rock Island, IL 61201 (bigeedey@augustana.edu); ²Department of Biology, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405-3700 (jdudycha@bio.indiana.edu)

Q: *Do we have any professional duties to our discipline? If so, what are they, and in what ways do these duties obligate us?*

Q: *Do such duties (if they exist) ever require us to take public stands or interact with the media? At tax-supported institutions, is the public the ultimate employer?*

Q: *How might these duties to the public or our profession conflict with duties to our institution? Does professional duty trump institutional duty or vice versa?*

■ Commentary on “Is the PR job tenure-track too?”

This case study raises questions about what obligations academic scientists have to engage in public discourse about areas relevant to their area of expertise. Lauren’s first and understandable reaction in this situation may be to try to find a way to honor both obligations: convince Stanley to address the school board, and send Jim to the field with the students. However, the details make it clear that Lauren is the best person for both jobs. There is a real dilemma here. Milton and Stanley both make important points that should be explored.

Milton reminds Lauren that she has contractual obligations to her employer, and that her employer does not value (or places minimal value on) educational outreach and public service. By accepting her contract with the university, Lauren is obligated to fulfill its mission – in this case, primarily research. At the very least, we can see Milton’s advice as being in Lauren’s best interest if she wants to get tenure and promotion at this institution. Although many professors fancy themselves intellectual free agents, they do have ethical obligations to their students and employers, at least to the extent that they cash those paychecks. This is not to say that professors must agree with an institution’s priorities or that they are forbidden from working to change those priorities. However, they must fulfill contractual obligations while apportioning their professional lives. To the extent that the school board debate really does begin to interfere with research and teaching, Milton is right to remind Lauren that she also has obligations to the university. No simple appeal to her “duty to science” can negate her other professional duties. Imagine if a plumber, after accepting money to fix your sink, announced that he intended to spend his time raising public awareness about the dangers of lead pipes. You might well be proud to employ that plumber, but only as long as he also fixes the sink in a professional and timely fashion.

Stanley’s rejoinder cuts to the heart of the matter. He argues that Lauren has a “duty to science” to educate the

general public. Shouldn’t the taxpayers be getting more for their money than just esoteric research? Don’t professors have an obligation to interpret science to the public? Critics of higher education, both within and outside academia (eg Karabell 1998), argue that taxpayers are ill served by the current priorities of most universities, and that they should, as Stanley argues, receive more public service from their publicly funded universities. If we accept the existence of broader professional obligations to society, then a dilemma arises when these compete for time with our formal, contractual obligations. Those who wish to emphasize public service over (or as equivalent to) research or teaching should find institutions that match these priorities, or they should work to change the priorities of their home institution. This would minimize the potential for conflict between duty to science and duty to employer. If Stanley feels that Lauren should carry on this debate, he ought to point out that a record of public service mitigates some reduction in research productivity. However, even if a particular institution values public service, some conflict will still arise. Lauren’s dilemma about the board meeting and the research trip is a case in point.

Our own ESA code of ethics (<http://esa.sdsc.edu/code-ofethics.htm>) does not clearly indicate any obligation to serve the public interest, but rather focuses on an ecologist’s duty – when he or she communicates – to speak honestly and without bias on areas in which they truly have expertise and training. This is certainly good as far as it goes, but are we also obligated to use our skills to influence public policy and debate? If so, what cost to our other obligations is acceptable?

■ References

Karabell Z. 1998. *What’s college for? The struggle to define American higher education*. New York: HarperCollins.

This is the fourth in our Ethical Issues series. For the introduction, please see the August issue (2003; 7: 330–33).